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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003365

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SUBJECT: POSSIBLE CABINET SHUFFLE WOULD CONTINUE TRADITION
OF SHORT-LIVED JORDANIAN GOVERNMENTS

REF: A. AMMAN 2798

[B](#). AMMAN 2740 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: PM Nader Dahabi has prepared a list of names for a new cabinet to discuss with the King, with the aim of announcing a new government in the coming weeks. In historical terms, the Dahabi government represents an unusual period of continuity, particularly given the cabinet's frequent rotation to reflect Jordan's complex web of tribal, ethnic, religious and political interests. The Dahabi government, however, was brought in more than a year ago not merely to serve a demographic purpose but rather to implement reforms. The question in the run-up to a new government is not whether there will be a new slate of ministers but whether the government's reformist agenda will survive. End Summary.

He's Making a List

[1](#)2. (C) PM Nader Dahabi told the Ambassador during a December 20 lunch that he plans to reshuffle the cabinet in the coming weeks. Dahabi indicated that he has developed a list of proposed outgoing and incoming ministers and intends to seek the King's approval of his list in the coming days. This corresponds to reports from contacts throughout the government, behind the scenes chatter, and rumors of a cabinet reshuffle in Jordan's media (Ref B). Dahabi stressed that his proposed changes are based on the competence of the ministers rather than their political and reform credentials and that the reshuffle would affect ministers that he had brought into the government, as well as ministers associated with reform. In fact, rumor has it that potential victims of a reshuffle include ministers viewed as under-performing (Minister of Culture Nancy Bakir and Minister of Tourism Maha Khatib), as well as several proponents of reform (Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf, Minister of Foreign Affairs Salah Al-Bashir, and Minister of Finance Hamed Kasasbeh). Interior Minister Eid Al-Fayez, who is considered a security-minded opponent of reform, is also rumored to be on the outs.

Musical Ministries

[1](#)3. (SBU) By the end of 2008, the Dahabi government will have been in office for 401 days. While this may seem short to outside observers, in Jordan it represents an average term in office for a prime minister and a rather long time for a government to survive without personnel changes. Looking at the historical record, the current Dahabi government also represents an abnormal amount of continuity. Several ministers (Interior Minister Eid Al-Fayez, Minister of Planning Suhair Al-Ali, Environment Minister Khaled Irani, Labor Minister Bassem Al-Salem, Minister of Awqaf Abdul Fattah Salah, Minister of Finance Hamid Kasasbeh, Minister of Health Salah Mawajdeh, and Minister for Media and

Communication Nasser Judeh) were carried over from the previous government of Ma'arouf Al-Bakhit. Others (Minister of Education Tayseer Al-Nueimi, Minister of Transportation Ala'a Batayneh, Minister of Justice Ayman Odeh, Minister of Public Sector Reform Maher Madadha, Minister of Industry and Trade Amer Hadidi, Minister of Culture Nancy Bakir, and Minister of Energy Khaldun Qteishat) were elevated to ministerial positions after stints as secretaries-general in previous governments -- a nod towards policy continuity as well as meritocracy. The ministerial slate and long history of government assignments also illustrates the small cadre of professionals able to fill executive positions. The past and present Royal Court Chiefs also held ministerial positions.

14. (SBU) Jordanian prime ministers usually spend a short time in office. During the first ten years of King Abdullah's reign, the average prime minister lasted 579 days -- about one year and seven months. (Note: This was in large part due to the 2000-2003 government of Ali Abu Ragheb, who held the job during a long suspension of parliament and who is the longest serving PM in the last twenty years. End note.) By contrast, King Hussein changed his heads of government more quickly. Since the reinstatement of parliament in 1989 until Hussein's death in 1999, the average tenure of a prime minister was just 359 days.

15. (SBU) Compared to the average prime minister, individual ministers often spend an even shorter time in office. Reshuffles have become slightly less common during King Abdullah's time, but it is a general rule of thumb that ministers (with a number of exceptions from ministries including Interior and Foreign Affairs) usually last for no

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longer than one year. There is also the phenomenon of the creation, merger, and elimination of ministries themselves. Many Jordanian ministries have been eliminated (information, government performance, administrative development, and youth are some recent examples), and several ministries have been combined and split over the years.

16. (C) Current and former ministers often complain that they barely have enough time to understand the mechanics of the bureaucracy they control, let alone implement an agenda. Former Interior Minister Samir Habashneh is one of many contacts who say that the absence of a set term of office for governments in Jordan leads to chaotic or nonexistent transitions in which important pieces of legislation are often lost in the shuffle. Ministers and their subordinates often remark that the pressure to put one's mark on a ministry leads to the dismissal of any previous policy initiatives as "old thinking."

The Balancing Act

17. (C) Despite the rapid turnover, ministerial posts in Jordan are prized for their prestige and influence. As such, the King and his prime ministers must salt the government with appointees from Jordan's tribal, religious, and political spectrum. King Abdullah further complicated the procedures for identifying ministers by requiring that a significant percentage be women. (Note: Four of the current 28 ministers are women. End Note.) Failure to adhere to the unwritten formula of tribal representation, ethno-religious diversity, or political leanings inevitably leads to complaints that certain groups are being excluded, regardless of whether that group has any qualified candidates for a ministerial post or not. Another delicate equation is the number of ministers of Palestinian origin, who generally serve in less influential positions. (Comment: Former PM and FM Taher Al-Masri is the most prominent exception, but for the most part the key ministries such as Interior and Foreign Affairs have been reserved for East Bankers. End Comment.) Currently, there are a handful of ministers of Palestinian origin, including Suhair al-Ali (Planning and International

Cooperation), Hala Lattouf (Social Development), and Ayman Odeh (Justice). Finally, there are also the expectations of Jordan's elite that by virtue of their standing and education, they are entitled to a stint as minister.

Comment

18. (C) The Dahabi government is not just the usual balance of ethno-religious and tribal groups. It was brought in more than a year ago to deliver an agenda in line with King Abdullah's stated priorities of an improved economy and standard of living, as well as political reform. Following the October ouster of reformist Royal Court Chief Bassem Awadallah (of Palestinian background), security-minded conservatives of East Banker origin may see an opportunity to lobby for ministerial candidates who favor the status quo over reforms that undermine East Banker interests. The key question in the run-up to a new government is whether the reformist agenda will survive.

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